

Neighborhood Business District Strategy

Proposed Land Use Code Amendments



Executive Summary



Neighborhood Business District Strategy



Key Recommendations

- Apply pedestrian overlays to commercial cores of neighborhood business districts.
- Remove unnecessary obstacles to housing development in commercial areas.
- Strengthen the pedestrian-orientation of commercial street fronts through development standards and guidelines.
- Refine and simplify use and maximum size of business standards.
- Revise requirements for residential amenities (open space).
- Control building bulk with floor area ratios to encourage wider sidewalks, plazas, ground-level open spaces, or view corridors.
- Lower parking requirements based on demand and to support alternative transportation.
- In Urban Centers and high capacity transit station areas, allow the market rather than the code to determine appropriate parking supply.
- Simplify the City's regulations so they are easier to understand.

Why a Strategy for Neighborhood Business Districts?

Seattle is a city of neighborhoods. A neighborhood's business district provides neighborhood identity and a place for goods and services to be exchanged, as well as a neighborhood meeting place. Seattle's neighborhood business districts are anticipated to accept much of the city's future growth and development.

Seattle's zoning for neighborhood commercial areas has been in place for almost 20 years. In ensuing years, the City has adopted a Comprehensive Plan detailing a growth management strategy for the future based on development of urban villages. Neighborhood plans have been developed for each of these urban villages. Finally, design review was implemented to help ensure that new development fits with a neighborhood's character.



To advance Seattle's urban village strategy and the goals of the plans and policies that have been adopted, the Mayor asked the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) to develop a Neighborhood Business District Strategy. The focus of the proposed strategy is to:

- Support job creation and business vitality
- Protect and enhance neighborhood character
- Improve the pedestrian environment
- Provide for housing growth in neighborhood business districts
- Achieve quality design through development flexibility
- Support transit connections
- Balance parking needs
- Make the Land Use Code easier to use

The Mayor's recommendations have been informed by the participation of many individuals and groups who have attended public forums, written letters, and participated in focus groups, advisory committee meetings and workshops.

WHAT THE NEIGHBORHOOD BUSINESS DISTRICT STRATEGY DOES NOT DO

- Does not rezone residential or industrial zones
- Does not include significant changes to height, bulk, or anticipated development densities.
- Does not change the primary role of commercial areas as places where business is conducted and goods and services are provided.
- Does not change zoned height limits.
- Does not change setbacks from residentially-zoned land.
- Does not change standards governing noise, odor, light, or glare.

Pedestrian Environment



Local businesses thrive when pedestrians are able to move easily among stores and services.



Where commercial demand is low, residential streetfronts can add interest, variety, and more customers.

Pedestrian Designation

All of Seattle's neighborhood plans envision walkable neighborhood business districts. To encourage compact, pedestrian-oriented centers, the Neighborhood Business District Strategy emphasizes and expands current pedestrian zone designations.

A single Pedestrian designation is proposed to replace the two pedestrian zones in place now. The Pedestrian designation will define pedestrian-oriented commercial areas. A broader range of street-level commercial uses that are compatible with and complement traditional retail sales and service is proposed to be allowed.

Allow Residential Use Along Some Streetfronts

In many commercial areas, residential uses will be allowed along the street outside of a pedestrian designation. In smaller NCI zones, commercial uses will be required along arterials and residential uses will be allowed on sidestreets at the street level. In C2 zones residential uses will continue to require conditional use approval due to potential conflicts between residents and heavy commercial uses.

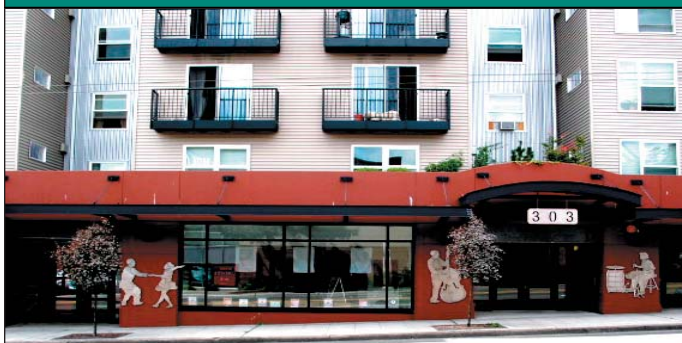
Well-designed residential development at the street can enhance the pedestrian experience, create distinctive urban neighborhoods, and provide the customers necessary for new and thriving business enterprises. Encouraging more housing within these areas also helps to meet the City's growth management objectives and reduces reliance on automobiles, contributing to efforts to reduce congestion and air pollution in the city.



Requiring too much commercial space may increase the likelihood of vacant storefronts. The commercial streetfront of this mixed-use development has been vacant for over a year.



Well-designed streetfronts are an important component of neighborhood business districts.



Pedestrian Recommendations

- Adopt one pedestrian designation (current pedestrian 1 and pedestrian 2 designations will be re-designated “pedestrian”).
- Make pedestrian designation facade and parking location requirements standard in all NC zones.
- Broaden the range of uses that qualify for street-level use in pedestrian designated areas to include community centers, hotels, medical services, and parks.
- Revise criteria for establishing NC zones and pedestrian-designated areas to allow future rezones of areas that are currently more auto-oriented.
- Designate and expand pedestrian designated areas initially in six neighborhoods (Admiral, Columbia City, Eastlake, Greenwood, Lake City and Madison/Miller). Other neighborhood business districts will be evaluated in 2005.

Mapping Pedestrian-Oriented Commercial Cores

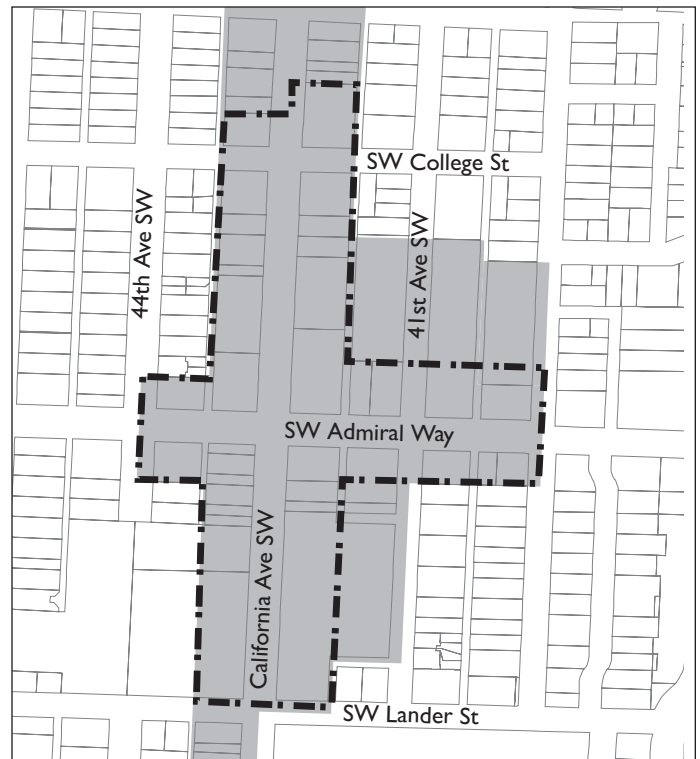


Pedestrian designations are proposed to be established or expanded in six business districts initially. The districts include Admiral, Eastlake, Madison-Miller, Columbia City, Greenwood/Phinney Ridge, and Lake City. Among these, the last three already have pedestrian designations established.

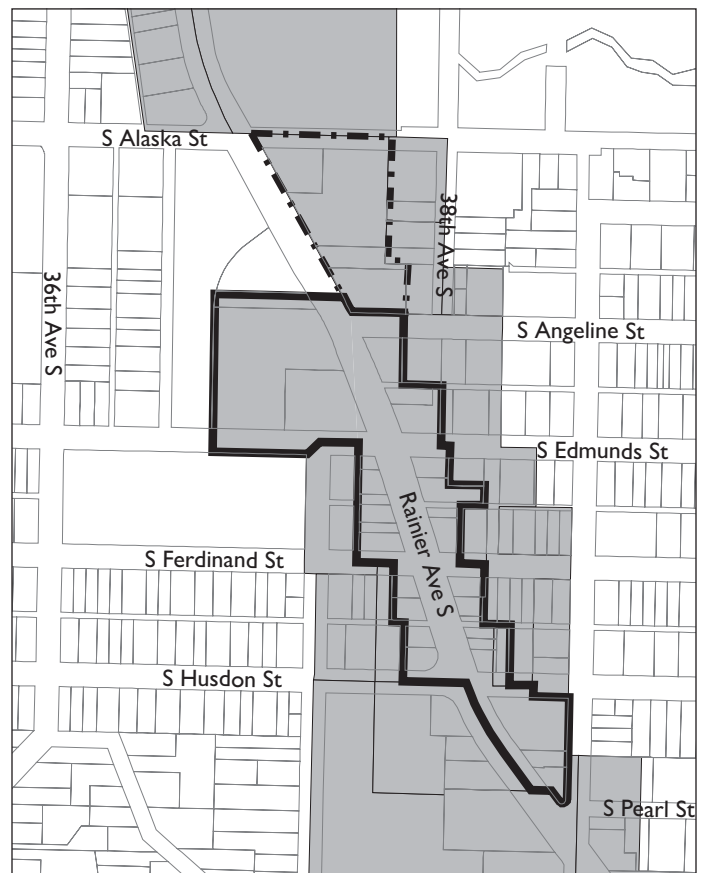
To inform the proposed mapping of pedestrian designations, DPD inventoried uses, vacancies, and streetscape conditions. Public meetings were held in the respective communities to discuss the proposed changes with residents, business and property owners.

Participants' biggest concern in the meetings was the amount of parking waiver that the proposed pedestrian designation would allow street-level businesses. Based on public comments, the Mayor's recommendation reduces the amount of parking waiver allowed.

DPD will examine and work with other neighborhoods throughout 2005 and 2006.






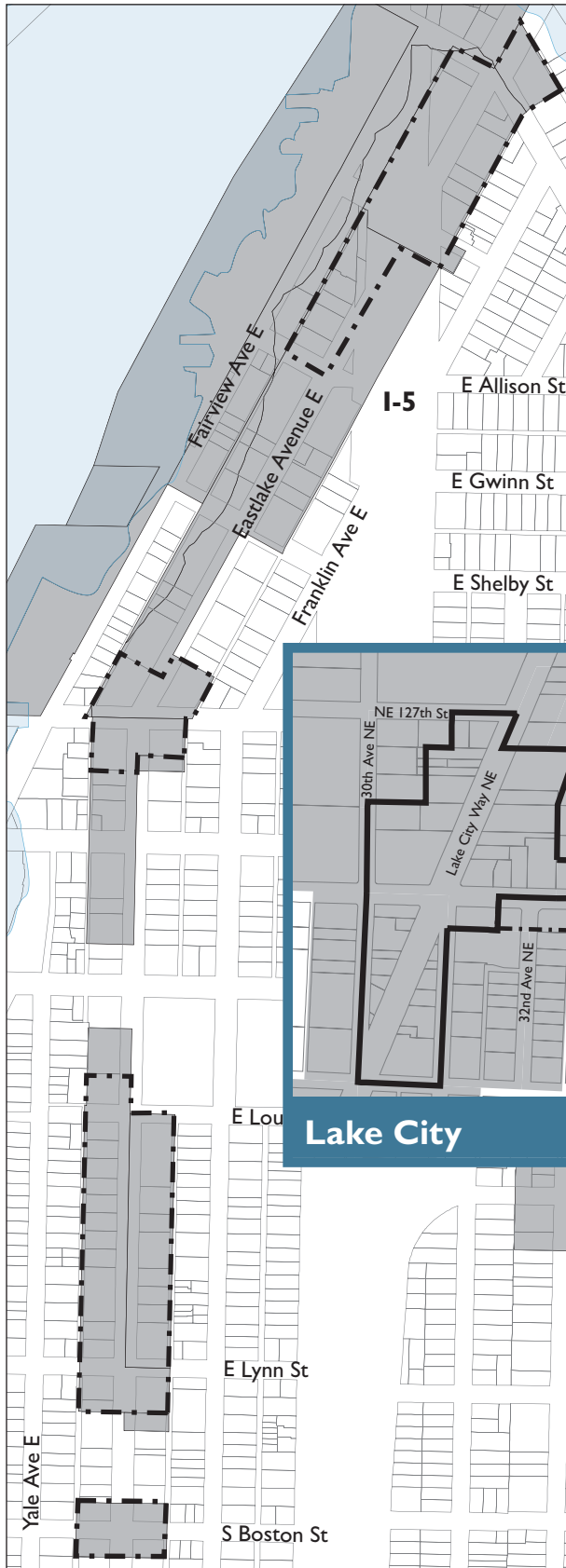
Admiral



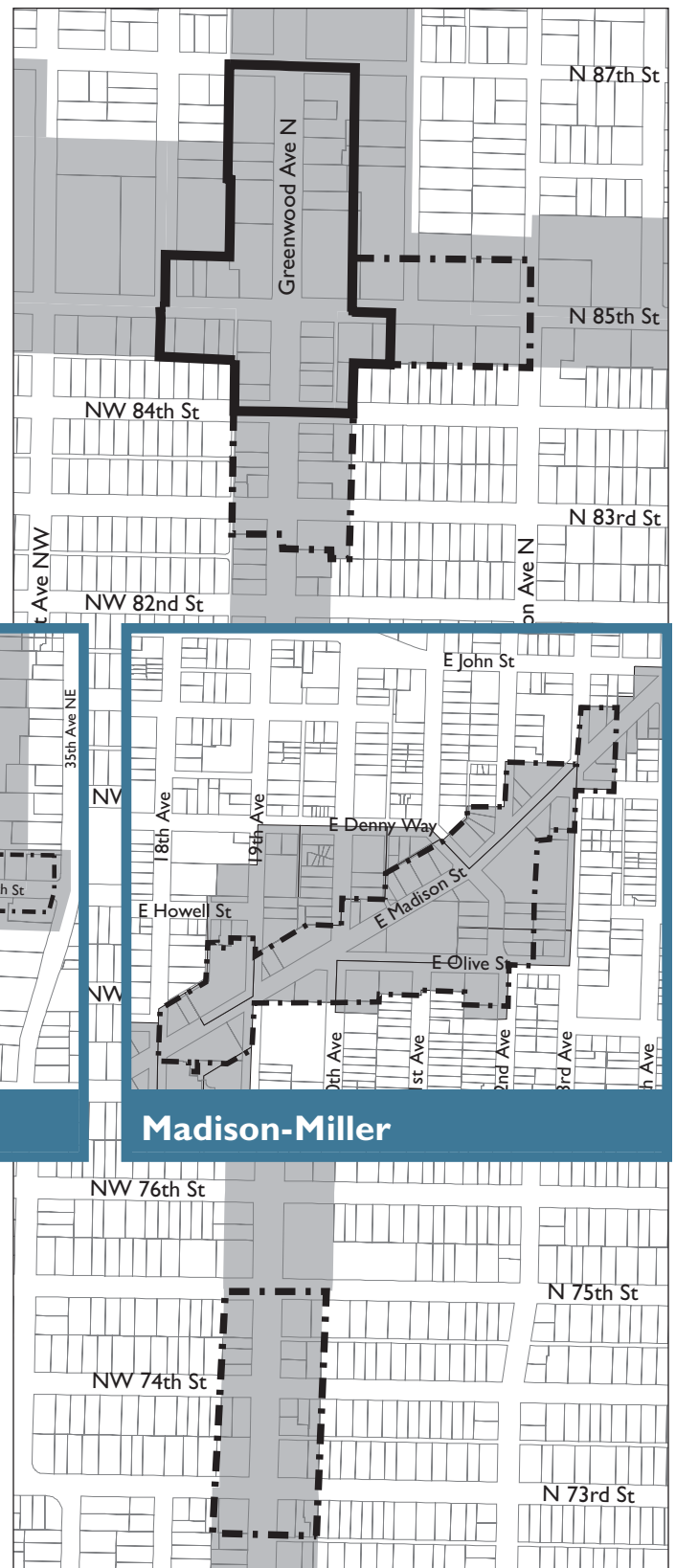
Columbia City

Key

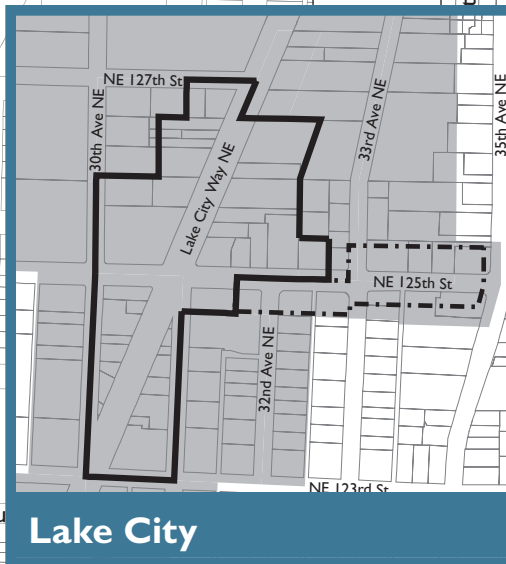
-  Commercial Zoning
-  Existing Pedestrian Designated Areas
-  Proposed Expanded Pedestrian Designated Area



Eastlake



Greenwood/Phinney



Lake City



Madison-Miller

Street-Front Standards & Guidelines



New design guidelines will encourage environments conducive to activity along streetfronts in business districts.

New streetfront standards will require transparency for commercial uses in all Neighborhood Commercial zones.



Development standards help define building forms and density. Wider sidewalks, overhead weather protection, street trees, seating, and pedestrian-scaled light fixtures also help to shape the character of business districts.

New guidelines and standards are proposed to help both residential and commercial development contribute positively to the pedestrian environment.

Seattle's design guidelines address the street-front. They include recommendations on appropriate storefront architectural details, ways to emphasize residential unit identity, and the appropriate location and access of parking, among others.

Development standards for the streetfront include requirements that limit blank facades, require windows, and require parking to be inside, behind, or beside buildings. New standards for residential streetfronts will further limit blank facades and require pedestrian-oriented entrances.

Streetfront Recommendations

- Limit the setback of buildings from the sidewalk.
- Prohibit parking between a building and the street and at corners.
- Reduce blank walls along the pedestrian street.
- Maintain minimum commercial space standards to help viability of businesses.
- Limit the number of driveways across sidewalks.
- Encourage the appearance of multiple storefronts with revised street-front design guidelines.
- Allow departures through Design Review for visually prominent residential entrances, such as "grand stairways" or stoops.
- In auto-oriented areas, require pedestrian pathways from adjacent sidewalks, through parking lots, to a retail establishment.



Medical services are proposed to be added to the list of uses allowed along pedestrian-designated streets.



Changes are proposed to make it easier for new businesses to start up in new mixed-use buildings and in existing buildings.

Over 115 different uses are currently regulated in the Land Use Code. The list of uses is proposed to be consolidated into broader use categories, distinguished by the nature of their impacts.

Currently, the City limits the size of many businesses in NC zones to ensure a pedestrian scale and function. In all zones, expansion is allowed for established businesses. There are fewer limits in NC3 zones and there are generally no size of use limitations in the auto-oriented C1 and C2 zones. However, office uses are limited in C1 and C2 zones to encourage their location in areas with better pedestrian, transit and bicycle access.

To support small businesses and the vitality of commercial areas, business size limitations for new businesses are proposed to be revised to reflect existing business sizes. This maintains the relative scale of neighborhood commercial areas, while acknowledging the need for flexibility in how existing spaces can be occupied.

To help limit storefront vacancies and provide a timely change of use process, the Neighborhood Business District Strategy proposes that up to 20 spaces of parking be waived for a new business locating in an existing building.

Use Recommendations

- Consolidate the list of uses. Distinguish uses only to the extent needed due to impacts or activities associated with the use.
- Simplify size of use limitations in neighborhood commercial zones without allowing larger uses than allowed for existing businesses today.
- Allow more flexibility when a new use locates in an existing structure that doesn't meet current code requirements:
 - ♦ Waive parking up to 20 spaces.
 - ♦ No longer require structural changes to meet mixed use standards under certain circumstances when adding residential units to existing commercial buildings.

Height, Bulk and Density Standards



Bulk is the perceived volume of a building. Density is the number of units divided by a unit of land measurement. FAR regulates both.



FAR, in tandem with design guidelines, can encourage wider sidewalks in appropriate places.

Height, Bulk and Density Standards

In neighborhood business districts, the scale of development is generally governed by the size of the lot and the height of buildings. Height limits vary among zones and are independent of the zone classification, while other standards apply more uniformly.

Height

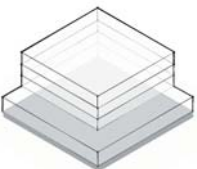
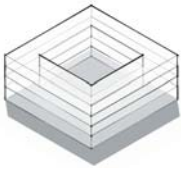
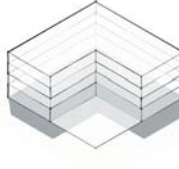
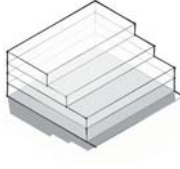
In commercial zones, height is generally governed by the zoned height limit. Under the existing code, additional height is permitted in 30- and 40-foot height limits to accommodate better designed street-level retail spaces. In such cases, additional height up to a maximum of seven feet (7 ft) is allowed when the number of stories a building contains or the density of the building that results is no more than that anticipated under the height limit (e.g. 3 stories in 30 ft, or 4 stories in 40 ft).

In these lower height areas, allowing a 4-foot height increase to accommodate street-level residential units that are offset from the sidewalk is proposed. This small increase will help create better designed residential streetfronts and protect the privacy of residents without increasing density.

Bulk

For mixed-use buildings, bulk is currently governed by a lot coverage limit of 64 percent for the portion of the building above the street level containing residential units. Commercial buildings containing no residential uses may cover the full area of a commercial lot when not located next to a residential zone. This requirement is only modifiable through design review.

For consistency, a Floor Area Ratio (FAR) is recommended for all uses to regulate bulk and density. FAR offers more design flexibility. It could help encourage wider sidewalks, plazas and open space, and room for pedestrian amenities such as sidewalk cafes and outdoor sales, creating a more informal and comfortable pedestrian experience. Base FARs would result in a size of development that is generally equivalent to that allowed under the current regulations.

Allowed by Existing Code		Not Allowed by Existing Code, but Allowed by Proposed Code	
			
Typical building form: podium above lot line-to-lot line first floor	Interior courtyard with exterior walls built to the lot line	Ground level plaza with upper stories covering more than 64% of lot	Terraced upper floors with any one upper floor covering more than 64% of lot

Density

Currently, residential-only buildings are subject to density limitations while mixed-use buildings are not. This was intended to encourage mixed-use buildings. However, the incentive to build substantially more residential units in a mixed-use building has resulted in an amount of commercial space that is not often sustainable by the market. Identifying where non-residential uses will be required at street level (see page 6), and treating residential-only buildings the same as mixed-use buildings in terms of density, eliminates the incentive to build commercial spaces where they may be ill-advised. Density is proposed to be limited by the FAR applicable to the property and by bulk controls, including height limits.

Proposed FAR Limits

Height Limit (feet)	30	40	65	85	125	160
FAR for structures with both residential and nonresidential uses	2.5	3.25	4.75	6*	6*	7*
FAR for any single use	2.25	3	4.25	4.5*	5*	5*

*Existing limits

Height, Bulk and Density Recommendations

- Replace current 64 percent upper-level lot coverage limitation for residential with floor area ratio (FAR) limits for all uses.
- Continue to allow additional floor area to meet City and neighborhood objectives such as focusing development around station areas and in revitalization areas, or as an incentive for mixed-use development.
- Eliminate current residential density limits for residential buildings.
- Allow a small height increase to accommodate well-designed residential streetfronts and privacy.

Residential Amenities



Decks like these provide access to light and air for residents while meeting current residential amenity (open space) requirements.



New FAR standards will help encourage new ground-level and semi-public open spaces, which today are rarely provided.

In commercial zones, “open space” is required as space for use by residents (not the general public). Open space requirements are primarily met in the form of decks or balconies. Current requirements for residential open space do not effectively correspond to the demand for residential amenities and increase development costs, raising the cost of housing. Residents prefer a broad variety of “residential amenities” such as community rooms, gyms, or roof decks. The residential amenity recommendations require an appropriate minimum amount of space for residents and will be more consistent with comparable zones with similar development such as Seattle Mixed (SM) and downtown mixed use zones.

Residential Amenities Recommendations

- Require residential amenity areas in an amount equal to at least 10 percent of the gross floor area of residential use, up to a maximum of 50 percent of the lot area
 - ♦ A maximum of 50 percent of on-site amenity area may be enclosed.
 - ♦ A maximum of 50 percent of the amenity area may be met off-site, by either constructing the amenity or by making a payment in lieu to the City for park improvements near the project.



Parking recommendations will allow businesses to move into existing buildings without having to provide new parking.



In Neighborhood Commercial zones the presence of off-street parking along streetfronts will be minimized.

Seattle's Land Use Code identifies the minimum number of parking spaces required based on the type and size of a use. These requirements, unchanged since the mid-1980s, are based on a national model that emphasizes single-occupant vehicle commuting and suburban standards, rather than promoting transit use and walkable communities, consistent with our Comprehensive Plan.

Changes are proposed to parking requirements based upon the City's 2000 Comprehensive Neighborhood Parking Study, in order to:

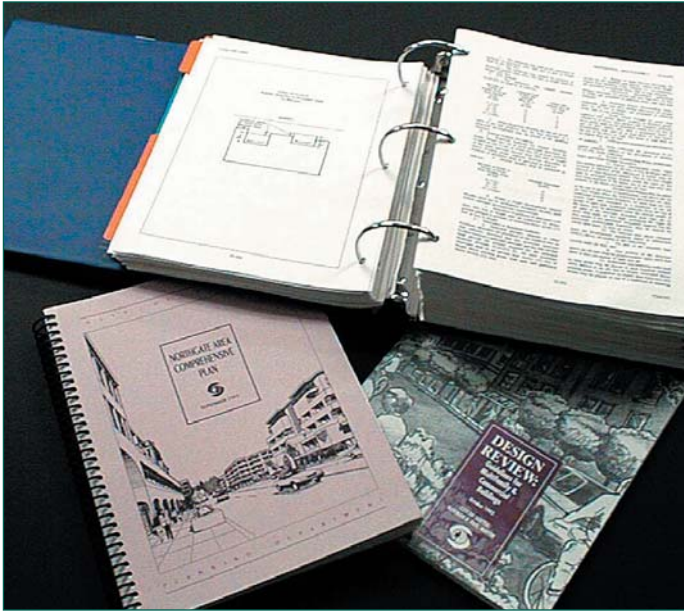
- **Build the urban neighborhoods that we want, not surface parking that we don't need:** advance the City's Urban Village strategy and encourage more pedestrian and transit-oriented development.
- **Reduce the cost of housing and commercial space:** developers and banks will still build what buyers or tenants demand, but requiring more increases their costs.
- **Support transit and other alternatives to the car in Seattle neighborhoods:** bus and rail transit, walking, and biking are healthy and viable alternatives to driving cars to work.
- **Improve the environment:** in the long run, reducing parking improves air and water quality, reduces reliance on fossil fuels, and creates more walkable communities.

- **Be responsive to local conditions:** better reflect higher transit use and parking demand data.
- **Support development of smaller lots and re-use of existing buildings:** parking requirements are especially burdensome for smaller development. The effective re-use of existing buildings will help reduce tenant vacancies.

Parking Recommendations

- Eliminate minimum parking requirements in Urban Centers and monorail and light rail station areas to reflect transit accessibility, and to encourage new development in Urban Centers.
- Allow on-site parking to be shared with other uses as long as it is signed short-term (4 hours or less).
- Establish a one-acre surface parking maximum to reduce new impervious surfaces.
- Lower parking requirements throughout commercial areas based on new demand data, transit accessibility, and City transit and walking goals.
- Waive parking for the first 1,500 ft² of businesses, instead of 2,500 ft² per use.
- Waive parking requirements up to 20 spaces for businesses that are locating in an existing building.
- Revise requirements for bicycle parking so that the number of parking spaces doesn't decrease when the number of required car spaces is reduced or eliminated.

Simplifying the Land Use Code



Code simplification will ease review of projects, while improving community understanding of the regulations and maintaining a high quality commercial environment.

One of the primary objectives of the Neighborhood Business District Strategy is to simplify the Commercial chapter of the land use code, so that it is easier to understand and to use. The proposed amendments will simplify the code in a number of different ways:

- Reduce the length of the code. The Commercial chapter will go from 51 pages to approximately 27 pages.
- Reduce the number of uses that are regulated. The proposed code reduces the number of separate uses that are regulated in the code from 140 to 90.
- Improve the graphics. Revised graphics are proposed which more clearly illustrate code provisions; new graphics sometimes take the place of confusing text.
- Use more tables and charts. Tables can sometimes present requirements more clearly than text can.
- Use simpler language. Care has been taken to write the new Commercial Land Use Code in simple, easy to understand language, whenever legally possible.

- Remove circular references. The current Land Use Code sometimes forces the reader to look at a number of different sections of the code to find answers to simple questions. These circular references are being removed from the Commercial land use code.
- Remove unused code provisions. Some requirements were put in place in anticipation of development types or circumstances that have never or rarely been pursued. These sections of the code are being removed.
- Remove redundant sections. A number of code sections are repetitive, with the same regulations appearing a number of times throughout the Land Use Code. Where appropriate, these sections are consolidated in one location.

These changes should result in a Commercial Land Use Code that is simpler and easier to understand.